



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Global China

Citation for published version:

Gerritsen, A & McDowall, S 2012, 'Global China: Material culture and connections in world history', *Journal of World History*, vol. 23, no. 1, pp. 3-8. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2012.0008>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1353/jwh.2012.0008](https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2012.0008)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Journal of World History

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Gerritsen, A., & McDowall, S. (2012). Global China: Material Culture and Connections in World History. *Journal of World History*, 23(1), 3-8. 10.1353/jwh.2012.0008

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.





PROJECT MUSE®

Global China: Material Culture and Connections in World History

Anne Gerritsen, Stephen McDowall

Journal of World History, Volume 23, Number 1, March 2012, pp. 3-8
(Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press
DOI: 10.1353/jwh.2012.0008



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jwh/summary/v023/23.1.gerritsen.html>

Global China: Material Culture and Connections in World History

ANNE GERRITSEN AND STEPHEN MCDOWALL

University of Warwick

HISTORIANS FIRST became aware of the significance of porcelain for understanding the connections that shaped the early modern world with the appearance of Robert Finlay's seminal study, published in the *Journal of World History* in 1998, and more recently revised and expanded into a full-length monograph.¹ Of course economic historians had studied the global trade in porcelain, focusing particularly on the records of the East India Companies that carried vast quantities of export ware from Asia to Europe, and drawn conclusions about its significance. Cultural historians had long noted the influx of Asian porcelain into the drawing rooms and cabinets of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, and the development of the craze for Chinese motifs and designs known as chinoiserie. Art historians and ceramic specialists had explored in intricate detail the objects themselves, carefully documenting the shifts in quality and design that occurred in export production over the same period. But by tracing the trajectories of Chinese porcelain through a variety of different cultural contexts, Finlay encouraged scholars to think about the ways in which Chinese porcelain created common threads in the early modern world. Seen together, he argued, these threads could reveal connected patterns, perhaps even an early modern "global culture."

¹ Robert Finlay, "The Pilgrim Art: The Culture of Porcelain in World History," *Journal of World History* 9, no. 2 (1998): 141–187; and *The Pilgrim Art: Cultures of Porcelain in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

The significance of porcelain for the study of world history is due in part to its unique physical properties. Fired at very high temperatures, porcelains can withstand the ravages of time and nature, surviving for centuries to tell their stories, regardless of the seas or soils in which they are submerged and which quickly destroy items of cotton, silk, wood, and paper. The malleability of the clay and the hard, white surfaces of the bodies render porcelain a material that can cater to demands and tastes from all over the world, making it a highly exportable commodity that easily crosses geographical and cultural boundaries. This unique material was for a large part mass-produced in the landlocked town of Jingdezhen, southern China, from where it was transported by river to Canton and thence distributed to a variety of global markets. Economically speaking, the export of porcelain, together with tea, silk, and other goods, was extremely important to the Chinese empire and brought vast quantities of silver into domestic circulation. But although mass-produced export porcelains and the more refined wares made for the imperial court and elite domestic consumption were manufactured in the same town, the scholarly world tends to regard these as largely separate in terms of designs, modes of production, and circulation. Leaving the production of ceramics for domestic use for the attention of China specialists and porcelain connoisseurs, most Western scholarship to date has concentrated on porcelains made for the export market.

The particular type of porcelain that best illustrates the global appetite for this Chinese commodity is the so-called “blue-and-white” ware: white porcelain decorated with designs painted in cobalt blue, dipped in a transparent glaze, and fired at such a high temperature that decorated body and glaze fuse together to form a nearly indestructible material. By tracing these blue-and-white porcelains from their origins in Jingdezhen during the Yuan dynasty to their consumers in Japan and Southeast Asia, throughout Eurasia, and into the Americas, the mercantile connections of the early modern world and the “influence” of porcelain are revealed. Such was the quality and price of the Chinese material, Finlay points out, that their import at least transformed, and often destroyed altogether, almost all other ceramic production centers and local markets. In their stead, he argues, we find the development of a truly “global” shared culture, an *ecumene*, based on a universal desire for the blue-and-whites of Jingdezhen. Widespread recognition of the superiority of this commodity generated, especially among seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europeans, a sense of rivalry and an urgent desire to imitate this material. After all, the Chinese were hesitant to allow Europeans to establish trade relations on what they

considered to be an equal footing, while the demand for porcelain in Europe seemed nearly insatiable. Frustration over unequal trade and a growing European disenchantment with China, its goods, and its people over the course of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, form part of the well-known narrative of the period.

During the past two years, the Global History and Culture Centre at the University of Warwick has hosted a research project on the cultures of porcelain in global history. Titled “Global Jingdezhen: Local Manufactures and Early Modern Global Connections” and funded by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council, the project has sought, among other things, to bring together scholars working on ceramics within different disciplinary traditions. This special issue includes four of the papers presented at a conference held at the University of Warwick and organized under the aegis of the Global Jingdezhen project. These four essays respond, from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, to the manner in which the story of porcelain in world history has been told to date. In doing so, we hope to expand, refine, and complicate aspects of this received narrative. The first of these aspects concerns the perceived exceptionality of porcelain and its representation as unique in existing scholarship. While the physical characteristics and resulting durability of porcelain objects make them extremely valuable as tangible manifestations of early modern global connections, we would argue that their survival in vast quantities relative to other manufactured products has tended to overemphasize their importance. The papers presented here all focus on porcelain, but are situated within wider contexts of material and visual culture. Not only does this mean that we explore the ways in which porcelain formed part of much broader, varied, and ever-changing material worlds, but that we investigate the ways in which ideas about porcelain itself, and about its production and its makers, changed through time and space.

When porcelain was imported from China, as Stacey Pierson demonstrates for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England and Persia, it was almost always incorporated into new cultural contexts in combination with other materials. Presentations of porcelain objects on silver stands or in temple niches transformed them into complex materials imbued with multiple meanings and associations. When Europeans encountered Chinese porcelain on their seventeenth- and eighteenth-century travels, as we demonstrate in our own article, they saw it as part of a wide array of material goods and commodities. The formation of opinions of the people they encountered and the creation in their accounts of Chinese identity, or “Chineseness,” were shaped not by porcelain alone, but by porcelain as part of the broader context of

material culture they observed around them and that they sought to understand. And of course the process of transmitting knowledge happened not only through the medium of porcelain itself but also through text and image, as Ellen Huang shows. The story of porcelain cannot be told by looking at objects alone, she demonstrates, but should incorporate the rich array of associated textual and visual materials available to us. Having studied porcelain as a unique object and material, it is now time, it seems, to approach it as part of more all-encompassing material culture studies that examine object, text, and image through space and time.

We also wonder whether the longstanding tendency to consider domestic and export wares as having entirely separate histories should not now be revisited. Not only has recent archaeological research within China demonstrated the presence of so-called export wares within graves and domestic settings, calling into question the age-old assumption that the Chinese themselves did not care for these cheap and mass-produced objects, but it is also becoming clear that drawing sharp distinctions between the two categories is more problematic than has hitherto been acknowledged. The wares found in excavations along the east coast of Africa were by no means only blue-and-whites from Jingdezhen, but included a wide variety of wares from a range of kilns in southern China that produced for domestic and export markets, as Bing Zhao demonstrates. An artificial division between the two tends to obscure from view smaller kilns that participated in export production, the demand for domestic-taste wares outside of imperial China, and the flexibility in production methods of coastal kilns. Huang's essay also calls the strict separation between the export stream and imperial production into question, tracing the origin of a range of visual materials depicting the production of porcelain, highly popular in the export market, to the orders of the emperor himself. Huang shows that imperial desire for precise depictions of sequentially ordered manufacturing processes led to the formation of knowledge and the production of paintings for export markets, connecting the imperial court and export audiences in a way that has never been done before. By discarding the separation between the two types of production and studying porcelain production and use as a complex whole, historians will allow the connections between the domestic economy in China and global economic flows, as well as the integration more generally of the Chinese empire into the culture of the early modern world, to become visible.

Finally, the work presented here, in particular that of Pierson and Zhao, suggests that the linear narrative that begins with production in

China and leads to the universal acceptance of the superiority of Chinese porcelain in equal measure throughout the early modern world is perhaps no longer valid. Pierson shows that we need more subtle narratives that take careful account of the complexities of the new contexts in which these materials were consumed, differentiating between the various social strata, religious environments, and material contexts in which porcelain was placed. Zhao, furthermore, shows that the arrival of Chinese porcelain along the African coasts did not precipitate the end of local ceramic production, but that Chinese imports were appropriated into the material culture of Africa. Her paper draws on recent archaeological explorations along the Swahili coast, and suggests the existence of complex networks of Chinese pottery circulation in a regional trade network that stretched from East Africa to the Persian Gulf and southern Arabia between the ninth and fourteenth centuries. She also notes the increase of Southeast Asian ceramics arriving in the African port cities from the fifteenth century onward, arguing that these ceramics became part of East African daily life. Zhao stresses the importance of seeing not only the full extent of this trade network but also the exchange of “knowledge, belief, and values” that accompanied the exchange of goods within this network. The idea of a shared cultural heritage, based on a near-universal appreciation of Chinese porcelain, as Finlay put it, can now perhaps be refined by illustrating the very different cultural contexts in which meanings were assigned to porcelain, and in which knowledge about porcelain, and Chinese material culture more widely, was formed. Rather than a Eurasian ecumene, the picture that emerges is one of interlinked but highly differentiated appropriations.

Taken together, these papers contribute to our understanding of early modern Afro-Eurasia not only as an interconnected world but as one shaped by ruptures and differentiation. Rather than emphasizing the unifying force of Chinese porcelain, we show the very different ways in which porcelains were integrated into new cultural contexts, from the Chinese imperial court to that of the Persian shahs, and from settlements along the African coast to the interiors of middle-class English homes. Rather than presenting a universal and uniformly manifested desire for porcelain, we see differentiated desires, reflected in various modes of consumption within different contexts. In the European case, we also note the transformation of knowledge about porcelain production over time from ignorance to a (mis)matching of knowledge to European contexts and finally to a sense of superiority on the part of European producers. Focusing on the distinctions and nuances of its appropriation, rather than its universality, shows that porcelain can

continue to contribute to our understanding of the connections that shaped the early modern world.

We would like to express our gratitude to all those who presented papers at the Global Jingdezhen conference and those who commented on earlier versions of the papers included here. Thanks are due, especially, to Professor Jerry H. Bentley for his insightful comments and his expeditious handling of this special issue.